

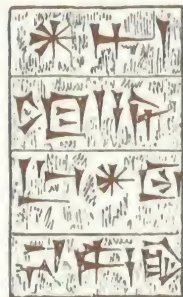
HISTORY FROM BELOW



How to Uncover and Tell the Story of Your
Community, Association, or Union

Jeremy Brecher

Commonwork/Advocate Press



History From Below

How to Uncover and
Tell the Story of Your
Community, Association, or Union

Jeremy Brecher

Commonwork/Advocate Press

Copyright © 1986, 1988, 1995
Published by
Commonwork and The Advocate Press, Inc.
Commonwork
Box 151
West Cornwall, CT 06796
Library of Congress
Catalog Card Number 86-082049
ISBN 0-929204-00-X

Table of Contents

Preface by Studs Terkel

I. Introduction.....	1
II. Doing a History Project.....	7
III. Gathering and Using Documents.....	15
IV. Oral History	21
V. Visual Materials.....	37
VI. Making a Product.....	41

Appendices

A. Antidotes to Anxiety in an Interview	49
B. Releases	50

Bibliography

Some Sources for Further Help	52
-------------------------------------	----

I would like to thank the following people for help and advice:



The Advocate Press
John Bennett
Marty Blatt
Marleen Cenotti
John Childs
Delgra Childs
David Corrigan
Jill Cutler
Dik Days
Keith Dix
James Green
Ron Grele
Jack Gillette
Joanie Gillette
Charles Lawrence
Jerry Lombardi
Staughton Lynd
Scott Molloy
Peter Rachleff
Marylou Ready
Gail Torre
Staff of the Walter Reuther Library
Jan Stackhouse
Stan Weir

This guide grows out of work supported by the
National Endowment for the Humanities



Preface

In an age when “how to” books deal with self-centered making out, whether in commerce or sex, Jeremy Brecher’s work is astonishing and refreshing; and, God knows, necessary.

History From Below is an exciting primer, enabling “ordinary” people, non-academics, to recover their own personal and community’s pasts. At a time when our history is being officially distorted and profaned, Brecher’s book can be a salubrious antidote: uncovering our true past. Ours, the richest country in the world, is the poorest in memory. In this work lies the way to help cure our national amnesia.

Studs Terkel

Introduction

I

This is a guide for people who are not professional historians but who want to explore the history of their own community, workplace, union, or local organization. It will tell you how to design a project you can do with the time and resources you have available; how to collect documents and do interviews; how to put together the material you gather; and how to present it to others in your group and community.



Why History From Below?

Until recently, history was often regarded as solely a matter of what the powerful, the famous, and the wealthy thought and did. It was “history from above.” What ordinary people felt and what they tried to accomplish was regarded as insignificant, not even worth regarding as part of history.

Recently, a student at a state university heard mentioned a large and dramatic general strike that had occurred in 1920 in his home town of Waterbury, Connecticut. He later wrote, “I live in the city that this incident occurred in and yet had never heard about it. When it was mentioned during the class lecture. . . it immediately aroused my curiosity. Upon looking into the matter, I found that there was nothing said in *any* of the books concerning Waterbury’s history (approximately 15 books included this period of time).”

This part of the life of his community had truly been “hidden from history.”

Such disregard for the history of ordinary people has led to a movement for “history from below.” This movement asserts that workers, women, immigrants, and ethnic and racial minorities have a history that deserves to be uncovered and made known.

The movement for history from below has challenged not only the elitist conception of who history is about, but also elitist notions of who should do history and who it should be for. It has emphasized that not only professional

historians but also ordinary people who are interested in the past of their families, communities, and organizations can contribute to the understanding of history. And it has shown that history, appropriately presented, can find a wide audience when it addresses matters which concern ordinary people.

The result has been an international movement of communities and workers investigating the histories of their own neighborhoods and workplaces. In England, thousands of people have participated in local “history workshops” which explore the history of particular neighborhoods. In Sweden, thousands of workers have taken part in the “dig-where-you-stand” movement, tracing the histories of their own workplaces and communities. More dramatically, when workers in Poland conducted a nationwide general strike, occupied their own workplaces, and created their organization Solidarity, one of the first things they did was to try to record and uncover their own history. Through interviews with early participants, published in their local union newsletters, they made sure that the story of their own movement was preserved. And looking further back, they began to recover and publish the history of Poland’s previous social movements.

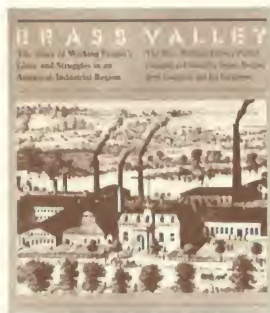
In the U.S., the movement for “history from below” has been growing over the past few years.

- THE MASSACHUSETTS HISTORY WORKSHOP organized history-oriented “reunions” of retired shoe workers in Lynn, old-time textile workers in Lawrence, and former clerical workers in Boston. These workers came together to share their knowledge and experience with each other, with historians, and with younger members of their communities.

- THE BEAVER VALLEY LABOR HISTORY ASSOCIATION, composed primarily of retired steelworkers in the Pittsburgh area, published a labor history newspaper telling month by month of the events that had occurred half-a-century before when the steel plants were being unionized.

- A COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION in a transitional neighborhood in Hartford produced a slide-show history of the neighborhood to introduce new residents to the area’s background. It also gave different ethnic and racial groups in the community a sense of their common heritage and an understanding of how inter-ethnic tensions had also existed in the past but had ultimately been resolved.

- THE BRASS WORKERS HISTORY PROJECT in the Naugatuck Valley of Connecticut brought retired brass workers and other community residents together with historians and media producers to prepare a book and a movie on the lives of those who had worked in the brass industry.



This guide is based on experience gleaned from many of these projects. It was prepared by a historian from the Brass Workers History Project who has also served as a consultant on many other community- and labor-based history projects. Suggestions and additions have been made by people who have had experience with dozens of other projects. We hope it will help stimulate an outpouring of additional projects in local communities throughout the U.S., and that it will provide you the guidance you need to make your project enjoyable and worthwhile.

What's in It for Us?

FOR INDIVIDUALS, history from below is of value because it provides a way of understanding oneself and one's background. Often individuals feel a need to discover something about their roots. They may try to uncover family histories and genealogies; the TV series *Roots*, portraying such a quest, gained more viewers than any previous program in history. But people's roots are not just their family; they have *common* roots in communities and workplaces. Too often these are ignored, leaving people with their desire to know where they come from unsatisfied. History from below allows you to learn something about where you came from not just as an individual but as a member of social groups.

Doing history can also give you a new perspective on the world around you. The images provided by the media are often mere snapshots, trendy but superficial. Examining the past, understanding how people felt and what they did, and seeing how things have changed can provide a sense of perspective that makes the contemporary world more understandable.

While it may come as a surprise to those whose experience of history in school was memorizing the names and dates of presidents and kings, doing history from below can also be a lot of fun. It has some of the satisfaction of asking questions and discovering the answers that comes with being a detective or an investigative journalist. And your project can be



built around activities you enjoy, whether that means taking and collecting photographs, reading old newspapers, or talking to other people about what they remember from the past.

FOR EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS, history from below provides an opportunity for school, college, and adult education students not just to read about history but to practice historical research and interpretation themselves. It lets them make a connection between history, their own lives, and the lives of the communities they come from. It challenges them to develop skills in research techniques, interviewing, interpreting documents, writing, and critical thinking—because these skills are needed to answer questions they themselves have formulated. And it corrects the one-sidedness of “history from above.”

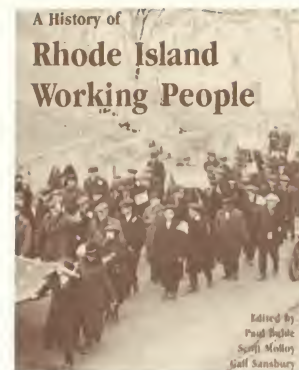
FOR LABOR AND COMMUNITY GROUPS, history projects can have a direct practical value in communicating to the members of the group, young people, and the public at large a sense of the group's heritage, experiences, needs, and goals. Such public understanding is especially important for groups that have been under public attack, or who have had to organize and engage in strikes, community protests, and other "troublemaking."

In most schools, students learn little about the history of labor, women's, minority, and other social movements. They are often exposed to business speakers and to "educational" materials paid for by corporate groups. It is no wonder if they come out of school with little preparation for the real problems of life in communities and workplaces. As one local union leader noted, "I was anti-labor myself when I came out of school. It wasn't till I went to work that I found out what the labor movement was really all about."

The media—newspapers, radio, TV, movies—give little sense of ordinary people's experiences or why they sometimes have to take collective action. Often they portray community groups "causing trouble" through some form of direct action or workers as disrupting things through a strike—without giving any sense of the reasons behind the actions, or the courage, self-sacrifice, and cooperation it took for people to get together to improve their lives. It is little wonder if "the public" starts to blame every problem from inflation to crime on the "greed" or "troublemaking" of social movements.

History from below can help you counter these forces right in your local community. If you put together a pamphlet or slide show about some aspect of your group, you are likely to find a receptive audience for it in local schools, clubs, and organizations. If you do a media project or a public event, there is a good chance of getting your materials covered in local newspapers and on radio and TV.

5



"History from above" has robbed people of their heritage and led to ignorance and distortion of the role of ordinary people in history. As two labor leaders wrote nearly forty years ago,

"If there is any one paramount characteristic of books on American history, it is that they are not histories of the people. Histories of the generals, the diplomats, and the politicians there are plenty; histories of the people—the plain people—there are few.

"This is no accident. It is part of the great conspiracy which consists in drawing an iron curtain between the people and their past. The

generals, the diplomats, and the politicians learned long ago that history is more than a record of the past; it is, as well, a source from which may be drawn a sense of strength and direction for the future. At all costs, that sense of strength and direction and purpose must be denied to the millions of men and women who labor for their living. Hence, the record of their past achievements is deliberately obscured in order to dull their aspirations for the future.”¹

“History from below” provides a way that you can participate along with thousands of others all over the world in setting that historical record straight.

People are always talking about their experience and what they have learned from it. History from below is, among other things, an extension of this kind of informal sharing of experience. A retired merchant seaman named Stan Weir describes how he was taken in hand by older workers on his first ship, “shown the ropes,” and taught what the other sailors had learned about how to relate to each other and the ship’s officers:

“They went out of their way to teach me all of the skills, the splices, the knots and hitches, and to make a deck sailor out of me. They wanted to win me away from the ‘topside’ [officers] for good. So they started telling me the history of the strikes to win the hiring hall, the fights to destroy the ‘fink hall’ and the ‘fink book,’ which had been parts of the government-employer controlled hiring system. . .they pumped all this history into me. And then they would quiz me. ‘What happened on such-and-such a date?’ ‘What’s Bloody Thursday?’ ‘Why were we able to win victories before getting a collective bargaining contract?’”²

¹ George F. Addes and R. J. Thomas, in the introduction to Henry Kraus, *The Many and the Few* (Los Angeles: Plantin Press, 1947).

² Lynd, Alice and Lynd, Staughton, eds. *Rank and File: Personal Histories by Working-Class Organizers*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973).

Doing A History Project

1 | How to Begin

There is a certain amount of groundwork you should do before you begin your project:

- Talk to other people in your community or group who might be interested in working with you.
- Talk to the officers of your organization so that they will understand what you are doing and won't be suspicious. You can even ask your organization to pass a resolution endorsing your project.
- Try to find out who is working on subjects related to yours and what research others have done. It is very helpful to draw on other people's work and knowledge, and there's no point in repeating what someone else has already done.¹

¹ See "Networking," page 13 for tips on how to find them.

2 | Defining a Topic

Ask yourself these questions about your project:

A. WHO WILL WORK ON IT? If you are doing a project as a group, discuss what each participant is interested in and thinks is important and what and how much they are really willing and able to do. Discuss whether and how to get others involved as well.²

B. WHAT ARE YOUR GOALS? If you want new members of your group to understand something about their heritage, look for an aspect of that heritage you can vividly present. If you want to help the public understand why people in your occupation form unions, pick a topic that will include the conditions people faced before they unionized.

² See page 13.

C. WHAT DO YOU LIKE TO DO? An amateur history project should be fun, not torture. A shy person who loves to pore over old newspapers shouldn't feel required to do oral history. Someone who loves taking pictures doesn't have to write articles. Look through the various activities described in chapters III to VI of this book and see which ones appeal to you.

Voices of a Generation:

Growing up in Lynn during the decline of the Shoe Industry.



D. WHAT SKILLS DO YOU HAVE AVAILABLE? If someone involved in your project is a good photographer, try to include photographs in your plan. Don't try to make a videotape if you don't have anyone experienced in producing video.

E. WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO FIND OUT? You may start with a very clear idea of just what you want to find out the history of: a particular strike, a union local, the founders of a particular community organization, or whatever. If not, you will need to define a focus for your research.

F. WHAT TIME PERIOD DO YOU WANT TO DEAL WITH? If you stick to the past fifty or sixty years, the chances are good that you will find living people you can interview about your subject. If you try to go further back, you will have to work primarily from written and visual sources.

G. WHO DO YOU WANT TO FIND OUT ABOUT? Will you focus on the people who lived in a particular neighborhood? The people who worked in one plant? The members of one union local? People of one ethnic extraction?

H. WHAT ASPECTS OF THE SUBJECT DO YOU WANT TO EXPLORE? This will determine very much what kind of research you do. One group of workers, who wanted to find out about informal relationships in their plant, collected and traced the origins of dozens of nicknames that workers had been given over the years. In another locale, retirees interviewed people of different generations to find out how changes in work had affected their lives. A third group, concerned with the history of union organization in their town, traced the early years of organizing month by month.

I. WHAT HISTORICAL RESOURCES ARE AVAILABLE? Look through chapters III and IV to see what kind of materials people use in history projects.

Suppose your project starts with just one person, yourself. You think you'd like to do something connected with the history of your union. You mention it at a meeting and two other people say they'd like to work with you. You sit down together and decide that you want to encourage people to think about problems of ethnic and racial tension in the union. One older member recalls that there once was a good deal of tension between Irish and Italians, but that it no longer seems to be an important factor. You decide that the evolution of Irish/Italian relations might be a good topic.

If none of you likes to pore over old documents, you'd better use oral history and focus on the last fifty or sixty years, which living people can remember. But if you have someone who wants to work in old newspapers, you may find fascinating material from the 19th century. One such study in New Haven discovered a plant where Irish and Italian workers held different jobs, often were in conflict, but managed to cooperate during a strike with the aid of a carefully formulated set of demands that addressed the needs of both groups.

Finally, you need to do some preliminary exploring to see if materials for your topic are available. If there are Irish and Italian newspapers and you have people to read them, you may have a great subject on your hands. If there aren't, and all the church records were destroyed in a fire and the ethnic clubs have all disbanded, you may have to stick to oral history. And if you do a few preliminary interviews and find that it is a topic most people are just unwilling to talk about, you may decide to revise your focus.

9



3 | Planning a Product

Once you have a topic, you need to think about what kind of products you would like to produce at the end or along the way. Chapter 6 describes some of the ways people have used labor and community history.

Start small, even if your longer-range plans are more ambitious. A modest project like gathering pictures from your group's members, mounting them on boards, adding captions, and putting them up as a display in your meeting room or at the local library may take only a few weeks' work and little expertise but can give a great sense of your group's past. From it you may find other people to work with, sources of information you didn't know about, and enthusiastic support.

If you go on to something more ambitious, make sure it fits with your skills and interests. If you worked on a slide show once and loved it, by all means consider making a slide show. Don't feel you have to present your work in the form of an article unless that seems like the right approach for you.

4 | Making a Work Plan

Once you have a topic and a product in mind, make a rough plan for your work. List the questions you would like to answer. List the people you want to interview and the sources you want to look at. (Of course, you'll find others as you go along, but list the ones you know at the start.) List the kinds of people and sources you don't have but would like to find. Figure how much time you have to spend on the project and when you'd like to have it done.

5 | A Place to Work

Set up a workspace. Don't leave your tapes and documents strewn around the living room! Make sure they are carefully put away in a filing system where you can find them when you need them.

Set up a filing system with folders for each of the following:

- Plans, outlines, lists of questions, and other guides you have made for your project.
- Each important individual
- Each important event
- Basic themes you are exploring
- Your correspondence with archives, other historians, etc.
- Notes on interviews, contacts, etc.

If you take notes on index cards, you should set up a card file with the same kinds of categories as well.

6 | A Historian's Questions

There are four main kinds of questions historians try to answer:

- A. What happened? History is most often a chronological narrative of events.
- B. Why did it happen? History attempts to find the causes and patterns of events.
- C. What did it mean to participants? History tries to recreate the experiences and attitudes of those who lived in the past.

D. What does it mean for us? History aims to find the significance of the past for the present and future.

Think about these questions when you are planning your research or organizing your product. If you are studying a community protest, for example, you will need factual material that establishes the major developments before, during, and after the event. You will want to figure out why various individuals and groups acted as they did, and why their actions combined to give a particular outcome. You will want to discover how different people felt about the protest and the conditions that gave rise to it. And you will want to say something about its significance for people today: how its outcome affected life in your community and what lessons can be learned from the story that could be useful in the future.



7 | Historical Research

11

Historical research is a bit like being a detective. It involves tracking down chains of evidence until the story finally becomes clear. It requires sifting a lot of material only a small part of which will prove valuable, and following many blind alleys for every one that opens up a new vista. Some people find that much of the research process seems like a waste of time, but many others find it enjoyable and challenging.

A good way to start is by making a list of questions you already have in mind. For example, if you are looking into the history of a nationality group in your community, you are probably already wondering about such things as:

- What were conditions like in the old country?
- Why did people come to the U.S.?
- What sorts of people came?
- How did their expectations differ from the conditions they found here?
- What did they do for a living when they first got here?
- How did they feel about becoming American citizens?
- What kinds of work did women do in the home at different times?
- What kinds of jobs were available to women who wanted to work outside the home? How did these jobs change over time?

- Did the jobs women held change during wartime?
- Did women have more power in the home when they were bringing home a paycheck?
- What arrangements did people make for childcare when both husband and wife worked?

As you go along with your research, you will find answers to some of your questions. Others will come to seem less important than you first thought. And, most important, you will find new questions that hadn't occurred to you. It can be helpful to sit down from time to time and jot down the questions that you currently think are important and would like to answer.

The next step is to identify the possible sources that might have the information you want. The next chapters of this book will tell you how to find and use three kinds of material:

- A. Historical documents (Chapter III)
- B. Interviews (Chapter IV)
- C. Photos and other visual materials (Chapter V)

8 | “But Is It Objective”?

Anyone who starts doing history will soon find that history is controversial. Different people have different views of what happened, why it happened, and what it signifies. Whatever their personal views, those doing history owe it to their subjects and to readers or viewers to fairly present what motivated people to act, how people perceived their own situations, and what

the consequences of their actions were. The purpose of history is not to show who were the good guys and who were the bad guys.

Your objectivity will be affected by your purpose. If you set out to prove that one person was right or that another was a scoundrel, it will bias your results from the start. Try to define your purpose more broadly: to discover why a particular protest developed, how a certain condition was established, why a particular strike was successful.

There are at least two sides to every issue. When dealing with a controversy or factional fight, try to talk with—and give weight to—people on all sides. You will often get a very inaccurate view from people on one side of a fight of what those on the other side really believed or wanted. It is easy to talk to people on one side and gradually absorb their way of looking at things—including their prejudices. Talk to people from all groups and learn as much as you can from what they have to say.

Don't just look for information that confirms what you already believe. Look for sources that might raise doubts about it. If your interpretation still fits all the facts when you have done so, you can place a lot more faith in it.

No history can be completely objective. But the process of doing history offers an opportunity to overcome one's own prejudices and to develop a broader viewpoint. One of the greatest benefits of doing history is the opportunity to acquire this kind of “historical perspective.”

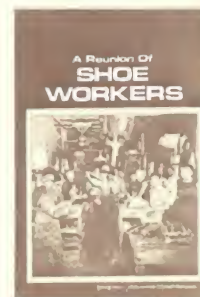
9 | Evaluating Sources

You can't prove what happened in the past the way you prove an answer in mathematics; all you can do is construct the most likely account of what happened. It's like a courtroom, except that often you have to be satisfied with "the most probable account" even if it can't be proved "beyond a reasonable doubt." In trying to establish the reliability of any piece of evidence, ask these questions:

- How did the source come by her/his knowledge of this information? An "eye-witness" is likely to be more reliable than someone repeating what s/he heard.
- What reason would the source have for making a true or false statement? A reporter for an anti-union newspaper may "slant" a story to fit the boss's prejudices; a partisan of a factional fight may pass on every rumor about an opponent as gospel truth.
- Do different sources agree? Reporters may distort the truth and so may human memory. But if two or three old-timers describe seeing the same incident in the same way, and you find a newspaper account that agrees with them, you can take it as true "beyond a reasonable doubt." (But make sure your witnesses aren't just repeating what they read long ago in the newspaper!) If sources disagree, look for other sources that may clarify the issue. Ultimately, you may have to weigh the evidence and see how likely each account is to be correct.

Keep testing each new thing you learn against what you already know. If something "doesn't fit" with the rest of what is known, it may be false—or it may cast what was believed before in a whole new light.

13



10 | Networking

Whether your project starts with an individual or a group, creating a network of people who can help you is likely to be crucial to your success.

Start with the present and retired members of your organization. Go to a meeting and briefly explain what you plan to do. Put a note in the newsletter or on the bulletin board. Talk to people about the project whenever you get the chance. Ask them for their advice and suggestions. Ask them for information and for people to interview. If some of them become interested in your project, ask them to work with you in a way they find congenial—perhaps they can take photos or come along on an occasional interview.

Next, extend your network to other parts of the community that relate in one way or another to your topic. Talk to people in senior centers, churches, schools, ethnic clubs, and other organizations. Tell them what you are doing and ask for their help. If you find people who are interested, ask them to work with you in one way or another.

At the same time, try to find other people who are interested in aspects of history that connect with your topic. Many states and regions have labor history societies, for example; if your project relates to labor, go to their meetings and talk with their members. Ethnic, religious, and other groups similarly have organizations of people interested in their history; try to go to their meetings and find people who share your interests. Your local librarian or historical society can tell you about local historians and teachers at local schools or colleges who are interested in local history; try to get in touch with them. All these people may have information and sources on your topic or know others who do; they may also broaden your understanding of your topic's context.

Try to keep in touch with the people in your network. Let them know from time to time that you are still interested and give them a taste of what you've been finding and what you're looking for now. You can even send out an informal newsletter from time to time.

Consider your network the starting point for solving the problems you meet along the way. If you need older women immigrants to interview, think about who in your network would know

some. If you need photocopying, ask if anyone can get it done at work. If you discover a letter in Polish, maybe someone in your network can find you a translator.

11 | Money

Compared to most things, doing history is cheap, but there are still some expenses involved.

The costs of research can be minimal. If you do interviews, you will need a tape recorder and tape; if you take or copy photos you will need a camera and film. You'll need office supplies and a place to keep your files. You'll need carfare to get around and you will probably want to photocopy some documents.

Products can be more costly. A simple photo exhibit might take \$50-200 for materials. A public presentation needs a meeting room and benefits greatly from refreshments. Publications generally cost hundreds of dollars to print, depending on size and format. Media projects vary enormously, from ones that just require a tape recorder to extravaganzas costing thousands of dollars.

History projects can be done almost for nothing if you have a good network. Tape recorders, cameras, boards for mounting photo exhibits, access to meeting rooms—these are available to the well-connected, however impoverished. People you have talked to over time about the project are also good bets for small contributions. And they are likely to back you if you decide to ask your organization to put up some money for the project.

Gathering And Using Documents

III

1 | Where to Look for Documents

Any written record that sheds light on the past is a historical document. An old letter, a diary, a map, a newsletter, a newspaper clipping—all can be historical documents. Documents are everywhere. Here's how to find them.¹

- Start close to home. Your own organization will almost certainly have files, including both internal documents and materials gathered from outside sources on subjects of interest to the group. Often the older records have been shoved into the closet, attic, or basement. Time spent with them will give you valuable information and lead to other possible sources.

- Former active members and officers are likely to have a box or a scrapbook with clippings, photos, letters, and other material

they saved. So will other community leaders, such as ministers, rabbis, priests, and former elected officials. Former members of an organization's education or newsletter committee are particularly likely to have saved such material. Approach such people and ask them if you could come by and look at whatever they have.

- A letter to the editor of the local newspaper or your organization's newsletter may turn up people with useful material.

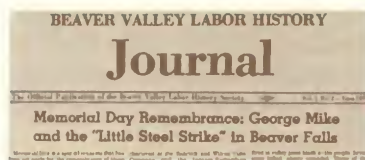
- Your group may want to sponsor a "community archive search" in which you ask people to search their attics and make the materials they find available for your project.

- Your local public library has spent years gathering material on your community and its history. It is likely to have not only books, but collections of clippings and documents, census records, and perhaps tapes or films. There will almost certainly be at least one person responsible for materials on local history who can guide you to what the library has available.

¹ Some documents, especially in libraries and archives, are preserved on microfilm. The machines for reading microfilm are easy to use—the staff of any place that has one will show you how.

- Most towns and cities have local history societies. While once they may have focused on the elite, today many are interested in preserving a more representative body of historical materials. They may have archives or other records that will be useful, or know where such records are kept. They may also be able to help you develop connections with other community groups and institutions you might otherwise find hard to approach.

- Your local newspapers may be a prime source. Your library will probably have complete runs of local papers either in bound volumes or on microfilm; if not, they will know who does.



- Most newspapers themselves maintain clipping files for their own use—known informally as “morgues.” If the morgues cover your period, they can be an invaluable aid, saving you the time of paging through the papers looking for stories on your topic. Ask your librarian or call the newspaper to find out their policy regarding use of the morgue by outsiders. Some papers make them available as a public service; others discourage outside use as a nuisance. If you get access, try to develop a cooperative relationship with the people who run the morgue—go at times that are

convenient for them and avoid a demanding attitude. Remember that helping you is extra work for them above and beyond their regular job.

- Local and state governments maintain many kinds of records. The town or city clerk or similar official can tell you what offices to visit for information on births and deaths, property transfers, and the like. Public agencies maintain files on the subjects with which they are concerned. In most cases you have a right to such information as a member of the public; be polite but persistent.

- Libraries, historical societies, and many other institutions maintain archives and document collections. You can locate papers relevant to your organization by asking its officials, talking with others who have been working in your topic area, and using the guide to manuscript collections prepared by the Library of Congress.²

It is customary to write or phone an archive before visiting. Tell the staff people what you are looking for and when you would like to come. They may be able to tell you immediately whether they have material that would be useful to you. Or they may suggest you come in and look at the guides that describe the materials in their collections.

² See Bibliography.

Archives have many rules for how and when material is to be used; they are not there to get in your way, but to protect the documents. Keep in mind that many institutions are understaffed. Most will welcome you cordially, but you may occasionally meet resistance from staff people used to dealing primarily with credentialed scholars and wary of frivolous requests from people off the street. A letter in advance indicating the seriousness of your research will normally smooth the way; if necessary you can supplement it with letters of introduction from officials of your organization or a history teacher at your local college.

When you visit an archive, it helps to be prepared with specific companies, names, dates, and events you want to find out about. If staff people are knowledgeable about the collection, they can be of tremendous help in finding what you want. Don't be embarrassed to tell them as specifically as possible what your topic is and what you would like to find. Learn from them how to use the guides to the collection yourself.

- Many national unions and other organizations maintain archives where both national and local records are preserved. These may be in a university, but they are usually open to organization members doing research. The national office of your organization or the education staff of your union can tell you where such records are kept and how to get access to them. A letter from an official in your organization may help ensure cooperation from the archive staff.

2 What to Look for in Documents

17

The files of an organization or the pages of a newspaper include vast amounts of information, only a small part of which is relevant to your project. You need to skim through the haystacks quickly, looking for the golden needles you can use. This becomes easier as you learn the format of the material you are working with.

- When you are starting out on a project, you need to establish certain basic facts about the subject. If you are studying the origin of a community organization, you need to know who was at the planning meetings, when a call was issued for its formation, what its founding charter contained, and what its first activities were. If your topic is a strike, you need to know who was involved, what the basic issues were, and when the main events occurred. At the outset you should look for documents which will answer these basic factual questions. If you have the dates for the events you are interested in, you can often get most of these basic facts by looking up newspaper articles for the time.

When you feel you have most of the basic facts, write them down in a couple of pages:

"The Northend Greek Community Club was initiated at a meeting of some of the earliest residents of the community on March 2, 1904.

“Present were:

“Their main concern seems to have been providing opportunities for the children of the Greek community to learn Greek; they were also concerned about providing supervised recreational activities for young people. They issued a call for a meeting April 10, 1904. It was attended by 80 people.” And so forth.

When you have written down the basic facts you have discovered, you will notice some important facts you still need to find. For example, you may know that at some point the Northend Greek Community Club affiliated with a national Greek fraternal organization, but you don’t know when or why. That will be something for you to keep looking for in future research.



• Next, look for facts that shed light on the questions you are asking. For example, if you are trying to find out why your union was started, and you find a listing of early officers showing that most of them worked in the same department, you have a strong hint to look in that department for an important part of the story.

• New questions will also occur to you. For example, you have discovered that the Northend Greek Community Club was founded by the Greeks who had been in the Northend longest. The next question to ask is, why? Was this because their children had been in the U.S. longer and were more likely to be speaking English and forgetting Greek? Or because older residents were regarded as the natural community leaders? Or because they had more interest in education generally than more recent immigrants? Or because more recent immigrants were primarily single men and women who did not have children to forget Greek? Or some combination of these or some completely other explanation?

As you go through additional documents, keep an eye out for any information that might shed light on these questions. If you find a church census of the Greek community showing that the more recent immigrants were single and had few children, you’ve got evidence for one possible answer to your question.

• Look for facts that contradict your own or other people’s assumptions. If “everybody knows” that your neighborhood was always Polish, but you find a street map from thirty years ago filled with French Canadian names, you have made a historical discovery that will change the way people have to think about your neighborhood.

- Look for documents that show how people felt about things at the time. Suppose a pedestrian was hit by a streetcar. You may find a letter in a local newspaper claiming that the victim was drunk and that this shows the evils of alcohol. Alternatively, you may find a letter from the wife of a streetcar driver saying that the driver had been working for 20 hours and that such accidents were the inevitable result of the drivers' overwork. Either of these will give you invaluable insight into how a section of the community saw the world in your period.

- Look for pictures and other visual materials you can reproduce in your product.³

3 Recording Information from Documents

When you find something in a document you can use, you need to record it in some fashion.

- If it is a fact or a short quote, you should carefully write it down. Most historians prefer to do this on index cards, because the cards can be put in any order when it comes time to write, but you can also use a notebook or anything else you find works well for you.

³ See Chapter V, Visual Materials.

For any quote or fact, *write down the source*: who said it, what document it came from, the date and page, and where you examined it. If you or anyone else wants to evaluate the material or go back to its source, this information will be essential.

- Occasionally a document will have so much information or provide so much insight into so many questions that you will want to have the whole document in your files. Find out beforehand what arrangements you can make to have such documents photocopied. (If the document is on microfilm, you will need a microfilm reader that makes prints—most larger libraries have them.)

- If you run across documents you want to reproduce in your product, arrange to have them properly copied.⁴

It is important that valuable historical records held by individuals and organizations be preserved for the future. When you find important materials, discuss with the owners what plans they have for preservation. Try to put them in touch with a library, museum, or historical society that will be willing to care for the materials in the future. This will help provide future access, both for yourself and for others, to the sources for history from below.

⁴ See Chapter V, Visual Materials.

BLANK PAGE

IV

Oral History

1 | Oral History and History from Below

What ordinary people have thought, felt, and done may be only dimly reflected in newspapers, the records of organizations, and official documents. The real record for much of history from below is written in the memories of those who lived it. And so oral history has become a mainstay of research on the lives of ordinary people.

If you enjoy talking to people, you will probably find doing oral history interviews easy and fun. With a little practice you can conduct interviews that will illuminate the historical record as effectively as those done by professionals.

2 | Who to Interview

There are two kinds of people you should interview:

- People who have special or “inside” knowledge of the subject. If you are studying a particular strike, it is important to interview people who were in leadership positions, who knew what was actually going on in negotiations, etc. If you are studying immigrant communities, an old-time priest or an activist from a church can be particularly informative. A retired company engineer can enlighten you about changes in the production process, as can the members of the local union’s time-study committee.

- People whose experiences are in some way representative of the group you are studying. Anyone who came to this country as an immigrant is likely to have something interesting to say about the experience. Rank-and-file participants in a strike may know better than the leaders why workers acted in the ways they did. Veteran workers often have an excellent grasp of how technology has affected their work.

Don't worry about "wasting" interviews; every interview you conduct will add to your understanding of the subject. But since your time and resources are limited, sit down from time to time and decide your priorities for future interviewing.

It is a good idea to start by interviewing people you already know. Then go on to people with whom you have something in common—if you are a male of Jewish background you may find it easiest, other things being equal, to interview Jewish men. Once you are at home with the interviewing process, however, it is important that you move on to other kinds of people. As an individual, you are likely to learn more—a Jewish man has a lot to learn from the way the world looks to an Irish woman. Your research will be one-sided unless you make a point of talking with types of people different from yourself. Besides, encountering different kinds of people is part of the fun.

Make a list of all the types of people who are in the group you are studying. It might include men and women from each of the principal ethnic groups in the community, each of the major companies, each of the larger occupations, or similar categories. If you don't have any interviews with older Italian women, and they played an important role in your topic, you may have to make a special effort to find some to interview. You may resist getting going with each new group, especially if you feel less in common with them personally—be aware of that resistance and try to overcome it.

Many groups—notably women, blacks, and other minorities—have been left out of the historical picture even more than other ordinary people. Don't let this happen in your history!



Photo/Virginia Blaisdell

3 | How to Find People to Interview

Once you have established your network you will already have a variety of contacts to draw on. Using these personal contacts is the easiest way of finding appropriate people to interview.

Brief talks to union, retiree, and other groups about what you are doing will bring you suggestions for people to interview. Ask for people who were involved in particular events: a strike in 1930 or the entry of women into "men's jobs" during World War II. Ask for people who have kept scrapbooks or otherwise shown an interest in the history of their community or organization. Ask for people who represent segments of the community whose experience

you have not yet explored, e.g. black women who came up from the South after World War II. And ask for people who are regarded as particularly good observers or storytellers, the neighborhood historians or shop philosophers.

A newspaper story about your project with a phone number to call may bring you responses from interesting people who are willing to be interviewed. So may a “letter to the editor” of your local paper or the publication of your organization.

You can track down particular people through old newspaper clippings, word of mouth, or similar means. Individuals can be traced through city directories, phone books, city hall or courthouse records, or phone calls to relatives.

Always ask those you interview to suggest others.

4 | Making Contact

It is a safe bet that most people will be both intrigued and suspicious when you approach them for an interview. Your first task is to avoid arousing their suspicions before they have a chance to find out why you want to talk with them so they can make an informed decision about whether they want to do so.

If someone who is in your project network knows the person you want to interview, it helps for her/him to make the first contact. S/he can explain the project, or at least let the person know that you want to talk with her/him and that you will be getting in touch.

If you discover people at meetings or other public events whom you might want to interview, by all means sit down with them for a few minutes individually, get their addresses, and ask if you may get in touch with them to set up an interview. This is a very natural way to “break the ice.”

If these opportunities are not available, your first contact will probably be by letter or phone. Don’t worry if you meet with a little resistance at first; many people are contacted by few strangers except salespeople and bill collectors. It can be helpful to use the name of someone the person already knows: “Susan Doe at the Senior Center suggested you would be a good person for me to talk with.”

You can write a letter first explaining a little about what you are doing and perhaps enclosing a clipping or flyer about your project, but don’t expect your interviewee to write back; most won’t. Rather, say you’ll give her/him a ring in a few days to ask for an interview. If you want people to remember your letter, try to call within a week.

You may find contacting people you don’t know emotionally draining. Don’t be surprised if you have to push yourself a bit to make those phone calls.

How should you explain your project and its purpose to people you approach? A very simple opening explanation is sufficient. "We are working on a history of the people who worked in the electrical industry around here. We are talking to all kinds of people who can tell us things about it." If the person wants to know more, answer questions frankly but briefly: "We are making a slide show." "It is paid for by our Community Council." "The union donated an office and its president helped plan the project." You don't have to supply such information unless it is asked for, but try not to evade any questions that are asked. Whatever you say, people will make their own interpretation of what you are doing.

It helps to converse for a few minutes before trying to make an appointment; people need time to get a sense of you and to find out what they themselves feel about being interviewed.

Some people will offer reasons why they might not be worth interviewing. Give frank statements of why they are. If someone says, "I wasn't too involved in the union," you can say, "that's o.k.; we really need someone who can tell us what it was like to work in your department." If someone says her/his memory is failing, you can say you would still appreciate it if s/he would share what s/he does remember.

Usually a phone call is all that is necessary to set up an interview. Some people may want to meet you face-to-face before they agree to an interview; by all means drop by briefly to see them. Don't worry if you get a certain number of refusals; people will have entirely valid reasons of their own for not wanting to talk with you, ranging from the present state of their health to family secrets they wish to protect. If you are getting turned down frequently, ask a friend to listen to you and evaluate the way you are approaching people.

5 | Making Arrangements

In making arrangements for an interview, you have to remember that the interviewee is doing you a favor, and that arrangements have to be made at her/his convenience.

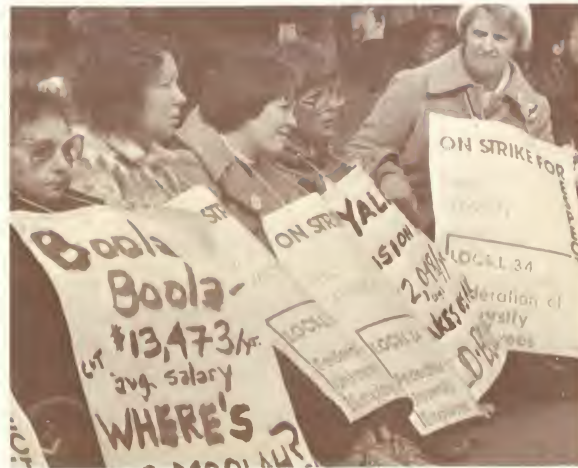
- **TIME** Ask what times are good for her/him. Many people have routines they don't like to disrupt. Try to set a time when you both have at least two free hours; time pressure can make an interview more tense and less productive. If you can't find a mutually agreeable time in the next couple of weeks, or if the person is in a particularly busy period, offer to call back in a few weeks to try again for a convenient time. Some people may use busyness as a way to put you off, but persistence in such cases usually gains an interview in the end.

• **PLACE** Think through the possible places for interviews and, if possible, give the interviewee a choice. “We could come to your house, if you would like, or you could come by our office.” Many people are more comfortable at home or will find it easier not to travel. Others may not want to invite you into their homes or may be interested in seeing where you work or may prefer talking to you without their other family members present. A place familiar to her/him, such as a union hall or senior center s/he frequents, can be excellent—but only if there is a quiet, private room you can use. If possible, avoid public places like restaurants and club rooms; the noise can overwhelm your tape recorder and the bystanders distract your interviewee.

6 Making an Interview Outline

Before you conduct an interview, make a list of all the topics you want to ask about. Ask yourself, “What might *this person* know that I want to know?” Look at your general list of research questions for ideas.

If you are interested in a particular strike, your list for a particular participant might include items like these:



Local 34 (Federation of Yale University Employees) strikers at non-violent witness.

Photo/Virginia Blaisdell

- Conditions leading to strike.
- First indications that there might be a strike.
- Arguments made for striking.
- Groups or departments that were particularly active.

And so forth.

If you are interviewing someone who was on the welfare committee, ask how hardship cases were handled. If you are interviewing someone who was not on the negotiating committee, avoid detailed questions about the negotiating process—but do ask for her/his sense of what the negotiations were like and what their significance was: what the rank and file knew about such matters is part of the historical picture.

When you have made your list of topics, say ten to forty items, put them in some simple order. Chronological order is often best:

- Where parents came from.
- Where they grew up.
- Character of neighborhood.
- First job.
- First contact with organization.

And so forth.

If you have several distinct subjects you are looking into, you could also divide your outline by subject, putting in one category everything about a social club, in another everything about politics.

Now you have an outline for the interview. This means you won't have to worry about what to ask next; you will have all the topics to ask about right in front of you.²

7 | Preparing for an Interview

Most people seem to find oral history interviewing enjoyable and rewarding. But your first interviews may also provoke some anxiety.

Start out by practicing with people you already know, friends or family members, who know what you are doing and are willing to be your

"guinea pigs." Interview them about their families, jobs, schools, or anything else they know about. If you can't work your tape recorder or forget what questions you wanted to ask next, no harm will be done.

If you are ill-at-ease about an interview, try to take a partner along. You should discuss in advance who is going to do what. It usually is best for one person to be primarily responsible for relating to the interviewee and in charge of conducting the interview; the others should only participate at her/his invitation. Put one person in charge of the equipment to forestall distracting discussions about recording.

8 | Tape Recording

Most people find that they are only able to remember a tiny fraction of what is said in an interview, and even that with limited accuracy. Fortunately, tape recorders today are cheap, convenient, and reliable. Use one whenever possible.

What to use. Keep it simple; you'll have enough to think about. A cassette tape recorder is far easier to use than a reel-to-reel model. Even a cheap machine will pick up most of what people say if you have a decent microphone and place it properly. Avoid built-in microphones; they pick up the noise of the machine and are hard to put close enough to the interviewee.

² But see p. 33 below, "On Following and Not Following an Outline."

If you plan to use the tapes for a radio or movie soundtrack, you will of course need better quality equipment and a very quiet location. You may want to take an extra person whose main responsibility is to handle recording.

Problems with equipment can be quite distracting during an interview. Practice a few times with the actual equipment you are going to use before you go out on an interview. Make sure you know how to set everything up, place the mikes, set the recording levels, and change the tape.

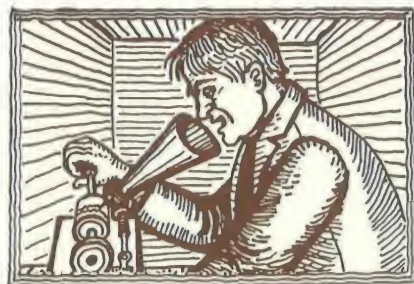
It's very frustrating to arrive at an interview and discover you've left behind something you need. Make a check-list of what to take: extra tapes, mikes, cables, batteries, extension cords, etc. Try to keep everything together in an equipment bag.

Use good quality, brand-name tapes. Avoid tapes longer than 45 minutes per side; they tend to snarl and break.

9 | Reminder Call

Many people don't keep appointment books and may simply forget the dates they make with you. You will cut your wasted time if you call people the day of the interview if possible, or at least the evening before, to remind them.

Even so, you should expect to be stood up occasionally. People have other things to do besides talk to you, and you are likely to be relatively low among their priorities. If



27

someone's father's garden needs plowing that day, s/he is likely to go plow her/his father's garden, even though s/he has an appointment with you. It's frustrating, but you will have to put up with it. Remember: s/he doesn't owe you anything.

10 | The Contract

From your first contact with a potential interviewee, you are working out an implicit contract about the nature of your relationship, what each of you will and will not do. How people respond to you will depend largely on the commitments they think you are making and whether they believe you will fulfill them.

The following three ground rules need not always be made explicit, but you should communicate by your action that you feel bound by them—as indeed you should be.

1. You will respect your interviewee. This need not mean that you will always agree with her/him. But it does mean that you will regard her/him as your equal, from whom you have much to learn.

When people agree to be interviewed, they are putting part of the meaning of their life in your hands. They should only be asked to do so if you are willing to respect it, and to guarantee that you won't abuse it, either in your personal interaction with them or in the way you use what they give you.

2. You will let your interviewee set limits on what is discussed. People may have all kinds of subjects they want to avoid. Some you may be able to guess, others not. A personal tragedy, a family scandal, a political secret—an interviewee may want to avoid any of these. From your first contact you should make it possible for your interviewee to skirt such subjects without the embarrassment of having to say outright, "I don't want to talk about that."

Avoid topics you know are likely to be sensitive or anxiety-provoking until you have worked out how to relate around less sensitive questions. If your interviewee's parents were divorced, don't start by asking about her/his parents; if a strike s/he led was a failure, wait to ask about that strike.

Avoid questions which put a person "on the spot." If alcohol is a sensitive matter, don't ask "Did your parents drink a lot?" Ask, "Did people drink a lot in those days?" If you get a curt answer, go on to something else. If it feels like safe ground, you can ask, "Was drinking ever a problem in your family?" If s/he doesn't want to talk about her/his parents' drinking, s/he can still say, "Yes, I had quite a few close relatives with alcohol problems." Ask questions

which invite the interviewee to tell exactly what you want to know, but which allow her/him the option of not doing so.

3. You will protect the interviewee's confidentiality. At the start of each interview say, "Anytime you don't want something recorded, we can just shut the tape off. If there is anything you don't want used, we can record it but put it off the record." People find this offer reassuring; most take advantage of it only occasionally.

Explain that you will have to get the interviewee's permission before you can make anything in the tape available to the public. If you are going to ask your interviewee to sign a release form, tell them so.³

11 | When You First Arrive

Your meeting with your interviewee is a time to show that you respect her/his feelings and are willing to be considerate of her/his needs:

- Be on time.
- Explain again, briefly, what you are doing.

Answer any questions about it.

- Create a comfortable situation in which to talk. Consider such comfort needs as smoking, coffee, and seating.

- Some people will want to chat first—about the weather, their arthritis, or what

³ See Appendix B for discussion of release forms.

Congress is up to. This is a useful warm-up which allows you to get to know each other a bit and get comfortable with the situation.

Other people will be set to launch into the interview the minute you arrive. This is also favorable; take advantage of their readiness and get started right away.

- Don't try to conceal your tape equipment, but set it up so that it will provide as little distraction as possible. If it is just sitting there, most people will soon come to ignore it. If you have to interrupt repeatedly to fiddle with it, they won't.

- Place the microphone near your interviewee with a pad under it. Don't put it on anything that will be tapped or handled; the mike will pick up the sound. Place the tape recorder where the person running it can see if the tape runs out. Make a short test recording and play it back to be certain you are actually recording your interviewee's voice.⁴

- Find out roughly how much time your subject has; you don't want to linger over minor matters and never get to the important ones.

- If you have a few relevant photos, documents, or other items, you can show them briefly as an ice-breaker. They will indicate that you have been working seriously on your subject

⁴ *Telling the Story*, listed in the Bibliography, gives advice on how to make broadcast-quality tape recordings.

and they may help to jog your interviewee's memory.

- Scan for noisy nuisances that might disrupt the taping. If there is a loud refrigerator or air conditioner, ask to turn it off. If the dog barks at every passing car, see if it can be put in the backyard. If the clock chimes every fifteen minutes, ask to disconnect or move it. Better yet, try to hold the interview in a room where such distractions are lacking.

12 | The Effect of Your Attitudes

Your attitudes will have a great deal of impact on the quality of the interviews you get. People are quick to pick up on others' attitudes, and will respond accordingly.

- Your respect for your interviewee and your ability to express it is your most important resource as an interviewer. People are experts on the part of the world they have lived in; treat them as such. You are coming to them for expert knowledge.

- If you aren't genuinely interested in what someone has to say, s/he will know it and respond as if you were just wasting her/his time. On the other hand, most people will pump their memories to find what you want if they sense that you really want to know about it. Let them see your interest.

- People are really different, in unsuspected ways. Don't make assumptions about what they are going to be like. Don't assume that an older

Italian man is necessarily going to be a sexist; maybe he had a radical father who was also a feminist. Don't assume that all people in management side against the workers in their hearts. Don't even assume that your interviewee had parents—s/he may have been an orphan! People pick up rapidly on your stereotypes and prejudices. The person you are interviewing is a unique individual, even if s/he is also in some ways representative of a group; assume that you *don't* know what s/he thinks, feels, or has experienced until s/he tells you.

- Some of the people you interview you will like or agree with; others you will dislike or disagree with. But you are there to learn, not to judge or convert them. What they think and feel is a valid part of history, whether you like it or not.

- Whatever your ultimate convictions, when you do history you need to be able to empathize with, and understand the points of view of, very different people who may have fought with each other and may still be fighting with each other. One of the functions of history is to give distance and thereby perspective on past conflicts. When you conduct interviews, you need to think of yourself not as a partisan of one or another social group, but as someone who is seeking the perspective that comes from learning from different points of view. Let your interviewees know that you take seriously what they have to say, even though you may also take seriously what other people have to say.

- Remember that your interviewees are doing you a favor. You owe them gratitude; they don't owe you anything.

It is not always easy to be aware of your own underlying attitudes. Nor is it easy to “see ourselves as others see us”—to know when we communicate things we don't intend to. If you are having uncomfortable times in your interviews, go through this section and see if any of your attitudes might have contributed to them. You could also ask someone else to listen to your tapes and make suggestions about your style of interacting.⁵

13 Interview Style

Many people are familiar with the TV interviews in which the interviewee's goal is to look as good as possible and the interviewer's goal is to trip her/him up or put her/him on the spot. This may make good entertainment, but it makes poor oral history. Your relationship with your interviewee should be a positive one in which you are cooperating to record her/his story.

- There is no one style that is “right” for interviewing. Use a personal style you are comfortable with. Don't strain to be like your source, or like a college professor, or like a TV interviewer.

⁵ See Appendix A for further suggestions on how to deal with problems that arise in interviewing.



Photo/Virginia Blaisdell

- Everyone knows how to have a conversation. Oral history interviewing draws on the conversational skills of both interviewer and interviewee. Use your interviewee's natural capacity for conversation and storytelling. Encourage her/him to tell stories. Let interviewees go at their own pace. Some people will give short answers to questions, others long: work *with*, not against, their personal styles.

- Don't interrupt. Wait a bit before rushing on to the next question; your interviewee may be searching her/his mind for more on the previous topic. There's nothing wrong with a little silence.

- Guide the discussion with your interest and receptivity. In one interview, an interviewee talked mainly about his work, hardly mentioning the union. When the interviewer asked several questions about the union, a

whole forgotten part of this man's earlier life came flooding back—he had once been a union activist but hadn't thought about it for decades.

- Encourage people to think and reflect. If an interviewee says that people are less close today than they used to be, ask what might be some of the reasons for the change. You can get valuable interpretations when you ask your interviewees to join with you in trying to figure out what the facts mean.

- Avoid cut-and-dried questions that invite cut-and-dried answers. Ask "What was the work like?" rather than "Was the work hard or easy?" Ask open-ended questions that direct attention to a particular topic, but invite a wide range of possible responses. For example, "What were some funny things that happened in your neighborhood when you were growing up?"

- Direct factual questions are of limited value. If you want to find out what day negotiations began, an old newspaper will be more useful than the memory of an old-timer. Frame questions that invite people to say what they *do* remember: "What can you tell about the bargaining sessions?" rather than, "What did the company propose in the third bargaining session?"

- Take care in dealing with topics that may be sensitive. Try not to create a situation in which somebody has to say, "I'd rather not go into that" or simply clams up. If you ask a question and somebody gives an answer that evades it, just go on to the next question. If it

is important, you can always circle back to it at the end of the interview and try putting it again in a different way.

- Avoid questions that pin people down. In a sensitive area, ask “How did people feel about that?” Your interviewees will then have the choice of whether or not to tell you what they themselves felt.

- Look for concrete details: stories and events and dialogues. If someone says, “Public services were terrible,” ask for some examples. If you are lucky, you may get an answer like, “The garbage was only picked up once a month. The schools had fifty kids in a class. My little brother broke his ankle falling in a pothole in the road right in front of our house.” Memories of conversations can be particularly vivid: “And then I told the mayor. . .”.

- Ask people how they learned what they tell you. If somebody says the Latvians came to America to escape the draft, find out whether they knew particular people in their family who came for that reason, if they read it somewhere, or if it is just something that “everybody knows.” This will help you evaluate afterwards how reliable the information is.

- Remember, you are not conducting a cross-examination in a courtroom. It is not your interviewee’s responsibility to prove to you that what s/he says is true or that what s/he did was right. Rather, it is your job to elicit and record what s/he is willing to tell you. Don’t tell your interviewees that their facts or interpretations are wrong. If someone says a

strike was won, don’t say, “That strike was really lost.” If you want to grasp why different people perceived the situation differently you might ask, “What was it that made it a victory?” or “Some people didn’t think that strike was really won; why would you say they were wrong?”

- A common fault of interviewers is to give their opinions too forcefully or at too great length. In an interview, unlike a conversation, there should not be “equal time” for the participants. You are there to be a “good listener.”

- Try to avoid what lawyers call “leading questions”—questions that influence the interviewee to respond in a particular way. Ask “How did you feel when the company brought in strike-breakers” rather than “Weren’t you angry when the company brought in strike-breakers?” Although your tone of voice and the questions you ask will influence your interviewee and are therefore always “leading” to some extent, try to create a situation in which people feel free to tell you something other than what you expect or want to hear.⁶

⁶ An exception to this rule comes when you have already heard your interviewee tell a particular story or give a particular rap, and are trying to get her/him to repeat it for the tape. In such cases, “leading questions” may be appropriate.

14 | On Following and Not Following an Outline



Photo/Virginia Blaisdell

The outline you prepared for your interview⁷ will give you a good idea of what you want to cover. But different interviewees will have very different ideas about how *they* want to go about telling their story. Some will be content to have you ask a question, to respond with their answer, and then to have you ask your next question. Others will want to take a more active role in determining the order and pace of discussion. The more you can adapt to the approach your interviewee finds comfortable, the fuller cooperation you are likely to get.

People who start out rather tense may give short, perhaps one-sentence, answers to your questions. To show you are genuinely interested in more detail, ask follow-up questions, even if they aren't in your outline. If you ask, "What did your father do in the old country?" and get the answer, "He was a farmer," try asking, "What did he tell you about conditions there?" "Could he make a living on the farm?" "What did he grow?" "What different jobs did the different family members have on the farm?" and "Were the neighbors all farmers, too?" Eventually your interviewee is likely to loosen up and respond more fully.

Other people will want to take charge of the interview. One interviewee had read a flyer which

⁷ See page 25.

had listed the topics a project was researching. He had prepared in his mind and went through the topics in the list, telling what he knew about each. The interviewer happily ignored his original outline.

Most people will fall between the extremes. You can let them take as much initiative as they want, then supply a question when they seem to have run out of steam on the previous topic.

People's experiences are often associated in their minds in very different ways than they would be in any outline. Someone may remember an accident that happened on the job, not when you are asking about workplace accidents, but when s/he is talking about her/his brother's wife's drinking problem—the accident happened when someone was drinking. You will get much richer memories if you encourage people to “free associate” for other times and subjects in this way. Don't be afraid of a little rambling; you can always reorganize the material when you are making your product. Relax, let your interviewee follow a train of thought or association to the end, then lead the discussion back to where you were in your outline.

Be alert for topics that come up that you should have thought of but didn't. Feel free to pursue them even if they aren't in your outline. This is one of the ways that interviewing can expand your understanding. Keep a notebook or piece of paper handy to jot down questions that occur to you in the course of the interview.

At the end of the interview, look over your outline to see if there are any questions you've forgotten to ask, or anything you want to try to go into a little deeper. Ask your source what you should have asked about that you haven't, or if s/he has anything else s/he would like to talk about on the tape. If there were unusual names mentioned, ask how to spell them.

When the interview is over, try to sit and chat for a few minutes before you start packing up to go. This chat establishes a human connection beyond the interview itself and is often a time when people remember important things they didn't recall before. You can always turn the tape back on for those additional memories.

Make clear before you go that your interviewee has made a valuable contribution; let her/him know how much you appreciate it.

15 | Group Interviews

the advantages of group interviews include:

- Different people can help jog—and correct—each other's memories.
- Discussions can lead to new insights and understandings.
- More people can be talked with in a given period of time.
- You may identify people you want to go back to for individual interviews.



Photo/Virginia Blaisdell

The disadvantages of group interviews include:

- People may be more inhibited in what they say.
- No one person is likely to have the chance to tell all s/he knows that would be relevant.
- Recordings tend to be chaotic; speakers are hard to identify, people interrupt each other and, worse, talk at the same time.
- It's hard to pay proper attention to everyone's raps and needs.

If you do group interviews:

- Have all participants identify themselves on the tape; this will give you a ghost of a chance of figuring out later who said what.
- Strongly encourage people not to talk at the same time; simultaneous conversations will be almost impossible to reconstruct from the tape.
- Try to have at least one project member for every three interviewees.

- Try to have one person who can pay attention to the recording process, to make sure everyone is being recorded.

Group interviews can be fun, but don't expect them to be orderly!

35

16 | What to Do with Your Tapes

A tape recorded interview contains a vast amount of information — the transcripts of ten two-hour interviews would fill a book! There are a variety of ways to use this material:

- The simplest and quickest is just to listen to the tape and make notes about what it says, perhaps stopping the tape now and then to copy down a sentence or two word-for-word. This is fine if you are just looking for particular factual information. If possible, do this on a tape recorder that has a footage meter. Jot down where on the tape each piece of information appears. At the same time you can make a "log" by jotting down where on the tape each topic is discussed.
- Whatever your product, you can enrich it by quoting people in their own words. If someone tells a particularly dramatic story or makes a point in a forceful way, you can copy it out word-for-word for future quotations.
- If you are producing a radio show, slide/tape show, or other product with a sound track, you can copy short segments onto another tape for your sound track.

- If you have lots of time or lots of money, you can transcribe the tapes. But be forewarned: this can be a gigantic task, with limited rewards. It takes a good typist about five hours to transcribe one hour of tape. Before you commit yourself to fully transcribing tapes, try it out experimentally to be sure you know what is involved!⁸

Whatever use you make of them yourself, your tape recorded interviews are a valuable resource for future historians and members of your community. Mark each tape carefully with

the name and address of the people on it, the date of the interview, and if possible a short list or summary of the topics covered. You can keep the tapes from being accidentally erased or copied over by punching out the "write protect tabs." Make sure they are stored in a safe place with someone who knows about them and will take care of them. Make arrangements with a local library or museum or your organization to archive them safely and permanently when your project is completed.



⁸ For advice on how to transcribe, see *Transcribing Without Tears*, listed in the Bibliography.

Visual Materials

V

1 | Types of Material

Whatever your project, visual materials can shed light on your questions, enliven your product, and give other people an easy way to absorb your findings. You can use:

- photographs
- cartoons
- buttons, insignia, logos, and other visual symbols
- paintings, crafts, and other artistic representations of or by members of your group
- documents that can be vividly reproduced, such as award citations or labor spy reports
- physical objects that you can exhibit



2 | What to Look For

An enormous range of visual materials can be useful for history projects, including representations of workplaces, individuals, families, neighborhoods, community events, and the like. A few hours spent with books that use visual materials to illustrate social history will give you many ideas about what visuals can be useful. Look for visual materials which:

- Give a vivid impression of life as it was lived at the time of your project. These are likely to be more interesting and revealing than formally posed pictures intended to show “how it was supposed to be.”



- Illustrate basic themes you want to convey in your product.² If you want to know about social events in your church, what could be better than a photograph showing food preparation for a parish picnic?
- Provide information on questions you want to answer in your research. For example, a photo of your organization's executive board will tell you much about the group's leadership if you can find old-timers who can identify the people in the picture.
- Show change in people, places, and ways of life over time. For example, then-and-now photographs of your neighborhood.
- Illustrate popular attitudes and concerns of the period.

² See page 42.

3 | Where to find visual materials

The search for visual materials can go right along with the rest of your research. Wherever you go and whomever you talk to, along with your other questions ask about visuals:

- Many people keep a box of photos or a family album somewhere in their homes. These often have pictures of ancestors, family gatherings, community events, and even workplace scenes. Ask the members of your organization and anybody you interview to let you look through their family photos for material that might be of interest to your project.

Some people may be reluctant to show you these materials out of a feeling that they are only of personal interest and wouldn't be meaningful to anyone else. Explain to them that a picture of a family dinner can show what a dining room in the neighborhood looked like fifty years ago, and that a picture of a wedding can reveal a great deal about an ethnic group's customs. Most people are glad to share such materials once they understand why they are of historical interest. If some people are hesitant, ask them to think about it and approach them again later.

- Local newspapers often maintain picture collections.³

- Many companies have photos of their plants and offices. Ask to see what they have.

- Larger cities may have commercial galleries or archives that collect pictures of local interest and allow them to be reproduced for a fee.

- You can solicit pictures directly from the public through a newspaper article, a classified advertisement or, as one project did, through an “old photos contest.”

- Look for objects that can be displayed. One project concerned with Chinese Americans approached the owner of a Chinese laundry; when the laundry closed, the project was given the entire operation, tools, equipment, and all, for its exhibit.

4 | Identifying visual materials

When you find an interesting picture, write down everything its possessor can tell you about it: who is in it, when it was taken, by whom, and where. Ask who else might be able to help with such identifications. Use your network to get additional identifying information.

³ See page 16.

5 | Reproduction

39

Original photos and other visuals are precious and irreplaceable. Borrowing them for an extended period of time to use in your project is a serious risk. Try to make arrangements to copy photographs. This can be done commercially, though it gets expensive if you are doing more than a few. Alternatively, find a competent amateur photographer with the equipment needed to make the copies for you.

You will need a simple release form from the owner saying you have permission to borrow, copy, and use the material.⁴ For your own protection, return the original as soon as possible.

6 | Archiving

If you come across visual materials that are of particular historical significance, explain their importance to the owners. See if you can help arrange for the originals to be deposited in a library or other appropriate archive that will make sure they are properly preserved.

⁴ See Appendix B for a sample photo release.

7 | Taking Your Own Photos

If you or someone you work with enjoys taking pictures, by all means include original photographs in your project plan. A recent oral history project on clockworkers, for example, discovered that many retired clockworkers were still working on clocks in their home workshops. Taking photos of them at their work immediately became a priority for the project. Old local buildings, traditional community events, and interviewees are all appropriate subjects for picture taking.



Making a Product

1 | Making It Interesting

Whatever your product, these guidelines will help you get and keep your audience's interest:

- Get attention right at the beginning. A surprising fact, a good anecdote, or a striking visual image leads people to sit up and take notice.
- Use material that is vivid: anecdotes that are surprising, compelling, or amusing, pictures that are moving or shocking or visually stunning.
- Tell a story. If you can get your audience to wonder what happened next, and then tell them, you will hold their interest.
- Most people are interested in people. Make use of what journalists call "human interest" materials—those which attract interest because they reveal something about the lives of other people.
- Organize your facts and materials into themes or topics. Each section of your project should make a point, so that the audience can feel they have learned from it.

- Pick themes your audience can relate to their lives, experiences, and problems today.
- If you want to include material that is of interest only to a few, or that involves a lot of repetition, such as lists of officers or contract provisions, put it in a box, an appendix, or some other section by itself where people can skip it without having to withdraw their attention from the rest of your product.

2 | Four Possible Products

A. A Photo Exhibit

A photo exhibit is one of the easiest and most effective ways to present your story. It can also be a good first step for a larger project, helping you get response from the community, discover new sources of information, and find other interested people to work with. Here are the basic steps:¹

¹ For further guidance, see *Exhibits for the Small Museum*, listed in the Bibliography.

1. Define your topic.²
2. Get the basic facts about your topic.³
3. Collect your photographs and other visual documents and make good-quality reproductions (or enlargements if they are too small for easy viewing) for use in your show.⁴
4. Think of a few basic themes you can illustrate with your pictures. For a neighborhood organization these might be:
 - the first settlements
illustrated by pictures of early houses or families
 - early lack of community services
illustrated by photo or cartoon showing uncollected garbage
 - principal ethnic groups of the neighborhood
illustrated by photos of ethnic churches, fairs, or parades
 - formation of a neighborhood organization
illustrated by photos of founders, early activities, buildings, or charters.



Photo/Virginia Blaisdell

² See page 7.

³ See page 17.

⁴ See page 34.

- a campaign for neighborhood improvement illustrated by photos of residents petitioning for better street lights, photos of the street on a dark night, etc.
5. Put your themes in a meaningful order. The easiest order is often chronological, moving forward through time. But you could also, for instance, deal with the different departments of a factory from one end to the other, or in the order in which a product is made.
 6. Sort your pictures by theme.
 7. Select a few pictures to illustrate each theme.
 8. Write a one-paragraph introduction for each theme.
 9. Write a brief caption for each picture. Tell what is in the picture, explain its context, and say briefly what it tells about the theme it is illustrating. If you have good quotes from interviews or documents that are relevant to the pictures, use them.
 10. Now review your exhibit plan as a whole.
 - Does it tell a story that the viewer can follow from beginning to end?
 - Are there obvious questions a viewer will wonder about that you should answer in your text?
 - Will a viewer go away with more curiosity about, and a deeper understanding of, your subject?
 - Can you make it more interesting and lively visually? This is the time to make any changes that would improve the show.

11. Prepare a clean copy of your text in type large enough to be easily read at a distance. You can do this by using a computer system that has scalable fonts, by blowing up smaller text with a photocopier that makes enlargements, or by having your text printed.

12. Mat or dry-mount your photos yourself or commercially.

13. If the display is to be permanent, mount the pictures and text on the wall. If you want the display to be mobile, get several of the hollow interior doors sold at building supply stores, paint them, and mount your exhibit on them. When two or more panels are hinged together, they will stand up by themselves. The panels can be carried in a station wagon.

14. Have your organization sponsor an event for people to view and discuss the exhibit. Invite the press, and have glossy 8" x 10" copies of one or two photos available for publications to reproduce.

15. Make the exhibit available to your local library and other organizations, such as senior centers and Y's, that present displays in their lobbies.

B. A Public Event

43

Public events put on by local community and labor history projects have been variously billed as workshops, forums, celebrations, and reunions. They have brought together those with special knowledge, such as older organization members, community residents, or historical researchers, with other people who would like to learn from them. An organization's anniversary can provide a good occasion. Here are the basic steps for organizing such an event:

1. Decide who the participants will be. Is it primarily for the members of your group, for the people of your neighborhood, or for the public at large?

2. Try to involve at least one person in your planning from each segment of the population that you hope will participate. They can help you think about how to make it appealing, interesting, and socially and physically comfortable for the different sorts of people you want to involve.

3. Think about what you want to have happen. Do you want to have older people reminisce or "testify" about their past? Do you want them to share their experiences informally with younger people? Do you want to have speakers who will present the audience with an organized account of your topic?

4. Decide on a format for your program. Here are some that have been successful:



Photo/Virginia Blaisdell

- A reunion of older people who worked in the same workplace or industry or lived in the same neighborhood. This can also include a sprinkling of younger people for the oldsters to tell their stories to.

- A public forum with former leaders and/or historical researchers as speakers, followed by a chance for audience questions and response.

- A workshop with quite a few people speaking briefly and lots of time for discussion.

- A showing of slides, with a request for those watching to identify local people, places, and events and explain their background.

5. Make arrangements appropriate for those you want to participate. A chance to get out of the house, see old friends, and receive a free meal can be a real inducement for older people. However, if you want them to attend an event, you must also arrange safe transportation and not schedule it late at night. Don't plan a

gathering during the day if you want working people to attend. Plan your event long enough in advance so that you have plenty of time to make arrangements and do publicity.

6. Reserve the room, contact speakers, arrange for refreshments, and check on any equipment you may need, such as slide projectors, a sound system, or extra tables and chairs.

7. Plan the details of your program, especially who will do what and when. Decide what you will do if one or two people tend to dominate discussion and others therefore need encouragement to participate.

8. Invite those you want to attend. If you want the participation of older people, it helps a great deal to have someone they know invite them and help arrange their transportation. (One of the most effective reunion-type gatherings succeeded because the local union's social services director contacted dozens of former union members and encouraged them to come.) Announce the event in your organization's newsletter. If you want your neighbors, leaflet the neighborhood. If you want the general public, announce the gathering in your local newspaper and through public service announcements on radio.

9. Recruit a few people to show up early, pitch in, and help take care of whatever needs to be done while the gathering is under way. While one person is chairing, other people will be needed to help a non-mobile person find a telephone, listen to those who can't wait their

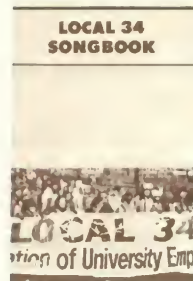
turn to tell their stories, or call to find out why the refreshments are late.

10. Make a permanent record of the event. Be sure that photographs are taken. If participants agree, tape record talks and discussions.

C. A Publication

1. Think about what kind of publication you would like to do. Here are some forms that have been used effectively by local groups:

- A pamphlet or booklet of excerpts from oral history interviews. This is often combined with photographs, a short introduction, and a paragraph or so giving background for each interview.



- A compilation of clippings, documents, and photographs with a running commentary by the authors, giving the background for each item.

- A collection of short pieces of writing by various people, describing their experiences or research. A group of retired steelworkers in the Pittsburgh area, for example, put out a tabloid newspaper several times a year in which they described their living and working conditions and union activity of half-a-century before.

2. Talk to printers and get some idea of what your project will cost to print and what formats might be appropriate. (Printers regularly give estimates over the phone; just call. Make sure you use one with a union label.) It's better to start with a modest project you have time to complete and can afford to publish than an ambitious one that never sees the light of day.⁵

3. Make a list of the material you would like to include in your publication.

4. Do your research and gather your material.⁶

5. Select your most interesting and revealing material—photos, excerpts from interviews, documents, and writings.

6. Put your material in an appropriate order. If you are doing an illustrated oral history, you could start with those people whose accounts go farthest back; include photos of the interviewees and of places mentioned in their recollections. If you are presenting the history of a town that has three distinct neighborhoods, you could put all the material on each neighborhood together.

⁵ See Bibliography.

⁶ See Chapters III-V.

7. Think about what is left out that you really should or want to cover. Seek documents or other materials to fill the gaps.

8. Write a brief introduction for your publication as a whole. Here are some of the points you may want to discuss:

- significance of the subject
- who worked on it
- why they did it
- brief statement of what it includes
- who it is for
- what you hope it will achieve

9. Write whatever you think needs to be added to the materials you have. Give any facts necessary for people to understand your subject. And say what you think is important about the *meaning* of this history. While you should recognize that people's interpretations will differ, you needn't be afraid to offer *your* interpretation.

10. Get an album with clear plastic dividers you can slip your material into. Arrange the material in exactly the order you think it should appear in the final publication. Even if it is a long time before you can publish your material, people will be able to see and learn from it in this "scrapbook" form.

11. Ask several people whose judgment you respect to read through the "scrapbook" and make suggestions. Not all their ideas will be useful, but even the best publications can be improved by getting different people's reactions.

12. Figure out how to distribute your publication and how many copies you will need. Obvious channels include your organization, local stores, and community institutions like libraries and museums. You may even want to approach them with your "scrapbook" to see how many copies they think they can distribute.

13. Work out your final format with your printers. They will tell you exactly what materials and information they need to do their job.

14. Have several people read everything at each stage of printing to look for errors. Remember, the printer is not responsible for errors that you have overlooked; you are.

15. When your publication is printed, plan some kind of public event, even if just a special meeting of your organization, to kick off distribution.

16. Send an announcement of your publication to local media and try to get some news coverage.

D. A Media Presentation

Media projects usually involve special skills that are beyond the scope of this guide.⁷ You will need to find out about and keep in mind the various technical requirements of your medium as you go through the following steps.

⁷ See Bibliography.

1. Consider what kind of project you are interested in and whether you have the necessary skills and resources available. Some media products that local groups have made include:

- Slide shows. This requires the ability to take good-quality 16mm photographs and access to a projector. Follow the advice⁸ on making a photo exhibit. Instead of captions, use the text that goes with each photo to make a script that can be read as the slides are shown.

- Tape/slide shows. This is the same as a regular slide show except that it has a tape recorded sound track. You can tape record a narrator reading a script, but you can also use other sounds. Best of all, you can use excerpts from your oral history interviews and select slides that illustrate the points the interviewees are making. Editing such a soundtrack and coordinating it with the slides can be tricky; you need an experienced person working with you. Presenting some slide/tape shows requires special equipment to coordinate slides and tape.

- Radio programs. Oral history interviews can make great raw material for a radio program as long as they have been recorded with care. You will need tape editing equipment and someone experienced in using it.

8 See page 41.

- Video programs. With home video equipment becoming more common, local groups have started experimenting with video programs. This is pretty much a new area—if you try it, you'll be a pioneer. Remember that editing videotape can be tricky. If your town has a community access cable TV station, it may be a source of equipment and technical help. Keep in mind that people are used to seeing fancy TV productions on which millions of dollars have been spent; your videotape may not get the response its substance deserves just because it doesn't have the surface of a slick commercial job.

2. Investigate what possibilities for distribution are available. If you have a community access TV channel, a videotape may make excellent sense. If no local radio station is interested in broadcasting a program on your topic, think twice before producing a radio show.

3. Most media productions require a group effort. Get together a team that has all the skills you will need.

4. Make a list of the materials you would like to get—interviews, pictures, etc.

5. Do your research and gather your materials.

6. Put your materials in an appropriate order.⁹

9 See page 42.

7. Write a narration to provide the facts and interpretations you need to make your materials understandable and meaningful.
8. Make a rough edit of your whole show.
9. Play your rough edit for a variety of people and revise on the basis of their reactions.
10. Put together your final version.
11. Hold an event, with appropriate publicity, to kick off distribution of your product.

3|Credits

Whatever your product be sure to give appropriate credit to those who helped you along the way.

Appendix A: Antidotes to Anxiety in an Interview

49

Interviewing should be and usually is an interesting and enjoyable experience for both parties. If your interviewee seems tense, ill-at-ease, or hostile, s/he may be concerned about:

- Lack of respect from the interviewer—fear that her/his life, feelings, or values may somehow be trashed.

Antidote: Clear expression of the respect you feel and your valuing of what s/he has to offer.

- Lack of familiarity with interview situation.

Antidote: Make situation similar to a normal conversation. Allow interviewee to begin functioning right away as an effective person who is capable of telling you exactly the kinds of things you want to know.

- Fear of being misunderstood or of putting self in a bad light.

Antidote: Let your interviewee explain why s/he did or felt what she did. Let her/him give her/his own justifications.

- Fear of discussing sensitive or painful subjects.

Antidote: Don't start with potentially sensitive subjects. Don't ask questions which pin your interviewee down.

- Concern about who will see or hear the interview.

Antidote: Frank discussion of confidentiality. A written agreement with the restrictions on use s/he desires.

- Concern whether s/he has anything to contribute. Many older people worry that their memory is poor. Many people think, "I'm just an ordinary person, there isn't anything I know that makes me worth interviewing."

Antidote: State directly why you want to interview her/him:

"We especially want to talk to people who worked in the industry before 1920."

"We need to interview someone who worked in the slitting department."

"We need someone who can tell us about the Albanian community here."

Start out by getting your interviewee to talk about something s/he *can* talk about. You can start by asking people about the pictures on their walls, or about their parents and their children. Avoid a long string of specific questions to which s/he is likely to answer, "I can't remember" or "I don't know."

- Concern about uncovering secrets. These may be personal scandals—say a criminal relative. Or they may be political—one interviewee, who had been a member of the IRA underground, insisted that questions be restricted to "union business."

Antidote: Let your interviewee set ground rules on what is or is not dealt with. If you sense resistance in an area, go on to something else. Come back to the difficult area later, but in a way which lets your interviewee say what s/he wants and remain silent about what s/he wants to withhold.

- Discomfort with sexual overtones of a situation. Some people may be ill-at-ease being alone with a member of the opposite sex or of the same sex.

Antidote: Meet in a semi-public space. Take along another person of the opposite sex.

- Presence of others, such as relatives.

Antidote: Make arrangements for interviews away from home. If this is not possible, try to ask enough questions of the inhibiting person so that s/he too feels part of the interview process and takes a constructive attitude toward it.

- Physical discomfort.

Antidote: Make sure your interviewee has a chance to smoke, go to the bathroom, get a drink, etc. If you sense a problem but don't know what it is, take a break, go to the bathroom yourself, offer a snack—in short, create a situation in which your interviewee is invited to take care of her/his personal needs.

Appendix B: Releases

1. Why Releases Are Necessary

In order to use a photograph, an interview, or any other material someone has provided you, you need their permission. The document in which they give you that permission is called a release. You will need a release for anything you get from someone else that you use for any purpose more public than your own perusal.

There are two reasons releases are necessary:

1) A release protects you. Legal rights to interviews and other historical materials are at present ill-defined. The fact that someone loaned you a picture or let you interview them does not prove that they gave you permission to *use* the material that resulted. Every once in a while someone gets disgruntled and charges that material of theirs has been used without their permission. Even if the charges are absurd, the complaint itself can only hurt a history project, making other people afraid to cooperate lest they be taken advantage of. If someone has signed a release, any such problem is forestalled.

2) A release protects the interviewee or donor. It allows her/him to feel confident that s/he won't be ripped off or embarrassed by use of her/his material without permission. Knowing that, s/he can feel more comfortable about cooperating with you.

2. What Your Release Should Say

You should write a release that meets the needs of your project. It should state as simply as possible, without legalese, what you want permission to do. Here is a release form that was used by the Brass Workers History Project for permission to use interviews:

"I hereby authorize the Brass Workers History Project to reproduce, copyright, sell, broadcast, exhibit, and distribute any or all audiotape or videotape recordings made of me by the Brass Workers History Project, whether in whole or in part, and whether in their original form or transferred into another medium, without limitation, for the non-profit educational activities of the Project."

"Signed _____ Date _____"

Here is another release form used by the Brass Workers History Project for permission to archive interviews and photographs:

"I hereby grant to the Brass Workers History Project the right to permanently store and preserve, in the Brass Workers History Project Archive—to be located in the state of Connecticut—all audiotape and/or videotape recordings made of me by the Brass Workers History Project, as well as all photographs, mementos, and other personal belongings donated by me to the Brass Workers History Project.

"I also hereby grant to the Brass Workers History Project the right to make the above-mentioned recordings and donations, or copies of them, available to members of the general public who have a bonafide interest in the subject matter contained in them.

"I grant the above rights subject to the following restrictions:

"Signed _____ Date _____"

You can find many more samples in the oral history guides listed in the Bibliography.

3. Getting the Release Signed

If you are planning to ask someone to sign a release, tell her/him so before your interview or before you borrow the possessions. Explain that it will protect both her/him and the project. You can ask her/him to sign before an interview, afterwards, or later when you want to use the material, whichever you and s/he feel most comfortable with. If you are going to make a transcript of an interview, you can offer to let the interviewee correct it before you make the final version.

The idea of a release is simple—it just gives written permission to do something the person has already accepted when s/he agreed to be interviewed or to loan material. But for some people, putting that permission in writing makes it seem a bigger issue than it really is. Answer honestly any questions about the release, but try not to make a big deal about it.

Occasionally someone is reluctant to sign a release. If you have this problem:

- 1) Find out if there is any particular reason. There may be some parts of an interview that s/he doesn't want made public, or s/he may want to hold onto certain rights s/he thinks might be valuable. In such cases, write in restrictions on the release form that address the concerns of the individual involved. For example, if someone is concerned about public airing of an interview, you can simply write in "No publication or broadcast may be made of any of this material without my written permission." You can always go back later for permission to use a particular quote in your product.

- 2) For most people, signing a release is something new. They may be reluctant just because they need time to think about it. If someone is hesitant, by all means ask her/him to think it over for a while; approach her/him again in a few weeks.

- 3) Occasionally someone will agree to give you oral permission but won't sign anything. In such cases, ask the person to say right on the tape that you have permission to use it, or ask her/him to say it with a couple of other people present as witnesses.

Bibliography: Some Sources for Further Help

History

A good source of information on the mainstream of U.S. history, including bibliographies, sources, trends, methods, controversies, etc., is

Harvard Guide to American History. Revised edition, Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1974.

To get a sense of the recent trend toward the history of ordinary people, see the essays in

Ordinary People and Everyday Life: Perspectives on the New Social History. Edited by James B. Gardner and George Rollie Adams. Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1983.

For an effort to pull together the many strands of recent historical work on modern American labor history, with plenty of references to other writing on the subject, see

The World of the Worker: Labor in Twentieth-Century America, by James R. Green, Hill and Wang, New York: 1980.

Many of the issues raised by "history from below" are debated in an English context in

People's History and Socialist Theory. Edited by Ralph Samuel. Routledge Kegan Paul.

To get a sense of what is going on in "history from below" in many countries, a fascinating source is *History Workshop Journal*, c/o Routledge and Kegan, Paul, Broadway House, Newton Road, Henley-on-Thames, Oxfordshire RG9 1EN, United Kingdom.

Documentary Research

If you are interested in using unpublished documents and working in archives, you can get more detailed advice from:

Research in America: The Use of Unpublished Primary Sources. Philip C. Brooks, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1969.

To find out what materials are in what archives throughout the United States, consult

National Union Catalogue of Manuscript Collections published by the Library of Congress. It should be available in any large library.

Oral History

Among the many primers on doing oral history, a good short one is

Oral History for the Local Historical Society by Willa K. Baum. Nashville: American Association for State and Local History.

Another primer, directed specifically to labor union women, is *Working Womenroots: An Oral History Primer*. Joyce L. Kornbluh and M. Brady Mikusko, Editors; Debra Bernhardt, Principal Author. Ann Arbor: Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations, The University of Michigan—Wayne State University, 1980.

Two collections of pieces on oral history are the fairly short

Envelopes of Sound: Six Practitioners Discuss the Method, Theory, and Practices of Oral History and Oral Testimony edited by Ronald J. Grele. Chicago: Precedent Publishing, 1975.

and the massive

Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology, edited by David K. Dunaway and Willa K. Baum. Nashville, Tenn: American Association for State and Local History in cooperation with the Oral History Association, 1984.

A thoughtful British analysis of many of the issues surrounding oral history in theory and practice is

The Voice of the Past. Paul Thompson. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.

A guide to transcribing tapes is

Transcribing Without Tears: A Guide to Transcribing and Editing Oral History Interviews. Mary Jo Deering and Barbara Pomeroy. Washington, DC: George Washington University Library.

If you are going to use oral history with students, take a look at

Oral History as a Teaching Approach. John A. Neuenschwander. Washington, D.C: National Education Association, 1976.

And, for a stunningly successful example of educational use, see *The Foxfire Book*. Edited by Eliot Wiggington. Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1972 and its successors *Foxfire 2*, *Foxfire 3*, etc.

Three periodicals concerned with oral history are:

International Journal of Oral History

Oral History Review

Oral History Association Newsletter.

A superb example of putting oral history in a form accessible and meaningful to the community from which it comes is

Cape Breton's Magazine: Devoted to the History, Natural History, and Future of Cape Breton Island published in Wreck Cove, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia BOC 1HO Canada.

Exhibits

The American Association for State and Local History, 1400 8th Avenue South, Nashville, Tenn. 37023, publishes dozens of "technical leaflets" on historical exhibits and related activities. Depending on your project, you may find some of the following relevant:

25. Planning Tours

32. Historical Site Interpretation

45. Newspaper Publicity

60. Content of Exhibit Labels

73. Exhibit Planning: Ordering Your Artifacts Interpretively

75 The Exhibit of Documents: Preparation, Matting, and Display Techniques

They also publish

Exhibits for the Small Museum by Arminta Neal.

Publications

For advice on history publication projects, take a look at

Researching, Writing, and Publishing Local History by Thomas E. Felt. Nashville: American Association for State and Local History.

Media

For general background on video for local groups, take a look at the now somewhat dated

Video Power: Grass Roots Television by Chuck Anderson, NY: Prager 1975.

More recent and more specifically addressed to history projects, is

Videotaping Local History by Brad Jolly. Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1982.

For radio projects, and for good general advice on audio recording and putting together narrative material of any kind, don't miss

Telling the Story: The National Public Radio Guide to Radio Journalism. Edited by Larry Josephson. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 1983.

Jeremy Brecher is the author or co-author of seven books on labor and social history, including *Strike!*, *Brass Valley: The Story of Working People's Lives and Struggles in an American Industrial Region*, *Building Bridges: The Emerging Grassroots Coalition of Labor and Community*, and *Global Village or Global Pillage: Economic Reconstruction from the Bottom Up*. He has run

community-based projects on topics ranging from labor history to ethnic music. He has written, co-produced, or served as a consultant for more than a dozen video documentaries, and won two regional Emmy awards for the documentary *The Roots of Roe*. He currently serves as humanities scholar-in-residence at Connecticut Public Television and Radio.

Reviews and Comments on History From Below

"Jeremy Brecher's work is astonishing and refreshing and, God knows, necessary. . . An exciting primer, enabling 'ordinary' people, non-academics, to recover their own personal and community's past. . . In this work lies the way to help cure our national amnesia."

—Studs Terkel

"Clearly written and tastefully designed. . . Professional historians. . . will find the guide's historiographic advice perfectly sound."

New York History

"Extremely valuable, attractively designed. . . an extremely important resource for reclaiming our past and redirecting our future."

—*Amerasian Journal*

"A very useful manual. . . Brecher's chapter on interviewing is exemplary for its simple style and nontechnical approach, yet thoroughness in addressing important issues of procedure and substance."

—*Oral History Review*

"Very readable. . . for anyone who has always had an itch to produce a history. . . *History from Below* is must reading."

New Haven Register

"Those seeking practical guidance in approaching 'peoples history' would do well to begin with Jeremy Brecher's *History from Below*. . . it includes an extraordinary amount of useful information."

—Bruce Nelson, Dartmouth College

"A first-rate publication. . . a well organized, readable and attractive guide."

—*League Bulletin, The Connecticut League of Historical Societies*

BLANK PAGE



In an age when "how to" books deal with self-centered making out, whether in commerce or sex, Jeremy Brecher's work is astonishing and refreshing; and, God knows, necessary.

History From Below is an exciting primer, enabling "ordinary" people, non-academics, to recover their own personal and community's pasts. At a time when our history is being officially distorted and profaned, Brecher's book can be a salubrious antidote: uncovering our true past. Ours, the richest country in the world, is the poorest in memory. In this work lies the way to help cure our national amnesia.

Studs Terkel

Studs Terkel